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### Opinion: phones down, for literacy's sake

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## Opinion: phones down, for literacy's sake

### Abstract

As adults, what do we expect from children when we talk with them? Should we expect their close attention and active engagement in return? Do we wish that they'd put down their electronic device so we could talk with them without distractions? And how often do we stop to consider what we are modelling for them ourselves?

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## Opinion: phones down, for literacy's sake

By: Lisa Kervin, Jessica Mantel &amp; Julie Coro in Opinion, Top Stories July 13, 2016 2 Comments

As adults, what do we expect from children when we talk with them? Should we expect their close attention and active engagement in return? Do we wish that they'd put down their electronic device so we could talk with them without distractions? And how often do we stop to consider what we are modelling for them ourselves?

Mobile technologies have become part of the furniture in many families. These devices allow us to work outside the traditional office space and even the traditional work hours, revolutionising the concept of working. Children have increased access to these technologies, too, and frequently engage with mobile devices and apps for both leisure and educational purposes.

There are calls for parents to consider the ways they encourage young children to engage with technologies. Parents are educated on the need to regulate 'screen time' and even warned about dangers of 'too much' screen time on a young child's development.

What appears to be missing though, is guidance for adults and their screen time when around their children. How much is too much? And what are the dangers of 'too much' screen time? This is particularly significant when we consider how a parent's own screen time may interfere with opportunities for interactions with their children. Perhaps, like us, you've seen instances where parents are 'watching' an after-school activity, or visiting the park, yet the parent seems more focused on their device than what their child is doing. Perhaps you too have overheard a child asking their parent a question, only to be told 'wait a minute' while an email is finished or a text message sent. While the opportunity to engage with such tasks outside the workplace offers many benefits in terms of flexibility of work hours, there are concerns, too.

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As literacy researchers, we have long known the importance of adult-child interactions for language development. For children, conversing with adults is fundamental to learning language. We know that children's communicative abilities get better with practice and that engaging in conversation supports this. Through language, adults can not only respond to children's questions, but also introduce new words, new concepts, and new perspectives that extend children's thinking, curiosity and understanding of the world.

What then is the effect of a generation of children who may not have the same opportunities to talk as generations past? How will they respond to the demands for oral language and vocabulary once they begin formal school? There is much research that shows the benefits of talking with young children in terms of vocabulary development, suggesting that an increased vocabulary leads to later reading proficiency and the social and emotional development that stems from conversation.

As literacy researchers who are also interested in technology, we feel it is imperative to consider the impact of parents' technology use on literacy development during the foundational years of a child's life. We know that experiences in the first years of childhood contribute to later success at school. This means we should encourage extended and purposeful parent-child conversations.

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